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MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES

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BROWNING'S DRAMAS.

I.

The word drama means action. The play, according to Aristotle, is an imitation of action presented artificially upon the stage for the amusement of an audience. It must consist of action, then, which will rouse the interest and hold the attention of the onlookers for a given length of time. It is the presence of an audience which has forced the unities upon the drama. The lesser unities of time and place are a natural outgrowth of conditions; any variation from them (though required often by the all-important unity of action) puts more or less of a burden on the ingenuity of the playwright and the imagination of the playgoer. The unity of action—rise, crisis, fall—is even more vitally connected with the psychology of the audience. Thus, since the interest of the spectator might flag, the interest deepens; the plot “rises” to hold his attention; and when the crisis is reached his mind has become so fixed upon the human interest, so complete has become his identification with the hero, that he joys and sorrows with him, shares in his intensest life. In the “rise,” therefore, we are chiefly concerned with “What is going to happen?”: in the fall, with how these happenings affect the main characters. Thus we pass in imagination from an onlooker at events to a participator in the inward life of the actors. Through the deeds we have come to know the doers of them. But, just as our acquaintance with the man begins with the first page of the play—or the rise of the curtain—and gives a distinct character interest to the “rise,” so our interest in the man’s fate gives a “plot” interest to the end. Each interest is always present; but first one and then the other is in the ascendant. In the main, the first half of the play appeals to the curiosity, which is intellectual; and the other half to the sympathy, which is emotional. Each play contains both elements; but in comedy the stress is laid through-

out upon the former element; while in tragedy the latter dominates.

The definition of drama as “Action humanly considered,” seems to contain the gist of the whole matter; it is one in which all critics have agreed. But as soon as the pronouncements become more elaborate, we find the critics dividing into two schools; according to the predominance they give to plot or character, and the right of way they claim for each. Thus one critic defines drama as: “A course of connected acts involving motive, procedure, purpose, and by a sequence of events leading up to a catastrophe.” While Stevenson counters in a decided: “It is sometimes supposed that the drama consists of incident. It consists of passion (which gives the actor his opportunity), and the passion must increase progressively to carry the audience with him to a higher pitch of interest and emotion.” Thus, in the opinion of one, the deed should be presented objectively, and the inner life be used only to show the significance of it; while from the point of view of the other, the deed is presented not for its own sake, but because only so can one find a *raison d’être* for the passion of the man.

The two points are by no means irreconcilable, practically; for, though the plot interest be considered the most important, yet the question “What made it happen?” involves, by the critics’ own showing, “motive, procedure, purpose;” while if the passion of the man be the playwright’s business, yet the question “What made him feel so?” brings the playwright unavoidably to the consideration of those events which produced this state of mind, and to those acts in which, to some extent at least, they find expression. Practically, the two often coincide in a single play. Thus a great dramatist may present a deed, or series of deeds, so significant of the doer’s nature that it might be said to interpret it; and at the same time so transforming to the nature of the doer that the act would mould him more completely to *his* nature; thus at once presenting and determining character; while, on the other

hand, the deed has been plainly an outgrowth from the circumstances of his outer life, and has such positive results in the actual world, both in its bearings on the lives of men and its influence on their minds and hearts, that it is decisive of that course of events which we call plot. The interaction of the elements—each on the other—gives us that subtle blending of circumstances and character which we call Fate. It is the binding force of circumstance, once a course of action is chosen; and the cumulative effect on character of a series of choices;—these are the two things which drive the man from the climax to the catastrophe.

In *Anthony and Cleopatra*, it is impossible to separate the character of Anthony from his career. We see his undisciplined nature in his ungoverned passion for Cleopatra; we see too how this passion unmoors him from the duties of his position. This reckless abandon of his duties as husband, statesman, and "triple pillar of the world," estranges Caesar; and though Actium might be called the "plot result" merely of these forces, yet the outward manifestation of failure has a distinctly disintegrating effect on his character.

In *Macbeth* the temptation comes from without as well as within. Macbeth is at once opportunist and villain. He is not at first merely a sinful man, acting out his evil nature; but an imperfect mortal, strongly tempted by opportunity, who yields, and is dragged down to spiritual degradation and worldly defeat. The murder of Duncan not only makes Macbeth, by force of crime enacted, a murderer capable of far worse atrocities; but actually forces him into them by need of concealment, and by the desire to keep what he has gained. Thus human life and human nature lie beneath the presentment of action. The deed is at once the crux of plot and character; it presents and determines both. It is when we consider the deed as representative that we have the unity of plot and character at once preserved, and the whole problem of stage presentation simplified: nullify the significance of the deed—as Browning does—and the whole art structure is destroyed, and a new arrangement, elaborate, complex, must be built up.

When we come to consider Browning in the light of these formulae—we find that it is just

here—in his attitude toward the deed—that he parts company with the other great dramatists. As a psychologist he is concerned primarily with the mind and heart of man; and it would seem, therefore, that in him character interest would predominate over plot. But in him there can be no such fortunate blending as we have noted; the question "What made him feel so?" leads him into a consideration of the subjective state of man. The more this is studied the more complex and subtle it becomes, until it becomes evident to the psychologist that events—even the acts of a life—are inadequate to express it. He aims, therefore, not to show character by acts, but so to present the character that through our knowledge of it we may interpret rightly the act which in itself would be but an imperfect expression of the man.

How would it be possible, for instance, to rightly interpret the murder of the Praefect, in *The Return of the Druses*, had Browning not previously made known to us Anael's struggle between faith and doubt; the confusion which existed in her mind between her faith in Djabal as God, and love for him as man, complicated by her loyalty to him as Leader of the people? Woman, worshipper, and patriot struggled within her until, unable to disentangle the complexity of her feelings, she forces herself to a great objective test. The act is an effort to pass from uncertainty to certainty; to prove her loyalty, and at the same time to kill her doubt. The motives which spur her on bear no relation to the horrible deed: for horrible it is, aesthetically if not morally. The subjective state could easily have found, we fancy, other and truer expression in entirely different acts. A comparison between the relation of Lady Macbeth to the murder of Duncan, and that of Anael to the murder of the Praefect, is very illuminating as to the relative value that the two dramatists put upon the deed as an interpreter of character.

It is just here, in his conception of the deed, that Browning, as we began by saying, parts company with other dramatists; indeed, with the accepted form of drama itself. We have seen that when the deed is considered representative the unities of plot and character are preserved, and the whole problem of presentation simplified.

'The drama is in the deed poised upon the point of interaction between the objective and subjective worlds.' Nullify the significance of the deed—as Browning does—and we destroy instantly the fitness of the old art form; and a new organization—elaborate, complex—must be built up within the old form. Thus, since the deed is not representative, one cannot get to man through the act, but must know the doer before one can understand the deed. This leads to a more or less complete interchange of the position which the plot and character interest have been accustomed to hold. Thus in *Strafford*, the first half of the play is taken up with the subjective life of Strafford, the psychology of his choice between "The People or the King? and that King, Charles!"; and the last half in showing the results of that choice in actual events. In the *Return of the Druses* we are first absorbed in understanding—getting at—the psychology of Anael and Djabal; at the end, in knowing what they will *do*. Thus, instead of learning to know a man through his acts—as in the majority of plays—we are first required to enter the inner life of the man to know him; and then, in the last half of the play, our interest may honestly be centred in what happens to him, for only then can we know how it affects him, or what he will do in an emergency, for only so are we capable of interpreting aright his acts. Thus it is we often find in Browning that the moments of our most complete identification with the character fall somewhere about the centre of the drama, where the plot crisis usually falls. In *Strafford*, it is at the end of the second act; in *Luria*, at the end of the third—(though in both instances this might be disputed); while the end of the play gives us not infrequently a great *situation*, or climax, answering to the crisis of the plot—which usually comes in the older order of things in the heart of the play. It is, of course, a psychological crisis, in which our interest lies in what the man will think, and which derives its significance, its special thrill, from our consciousness of his subjective state—but still a situation—in which the elements of surprise and uncertainty are not unlike those we see frequently in comedy, deepened by the gravity of the issue into the tone of tragedy.

This interchange complicates, too, the business of the drama. Although the business of Brown-

ing's first act is to take us straight to the heart of the man, and let him reveal himself,—yet there must be a certain amount of setting given, for the men cannot float loosely in chronology and space. Now these details of time and place fit far less easily into the presentation of character than into the development of plot. They are frequently slurred over, condensed into some chance phrase of the speaker who is pouring out his soul to us. We must catch at the situation anyhow; and this is far less easy a task than the old way of getting acquainted with the man in the unfolding of the plot. Again, however much Browning underrates the interpretative power of the deed, the character must as a matter of fact be doing something all the time he is being presented, or is revealing himself to us; while in leading up to the situation at the end—which is not only a supreme psychological moment, but is also a plot crisis—some sort of sequence in the course of events must be preserved. This leads to a new complexity of structure. First, as an excuse for the "passion" of the character; then, to develop the situation in which he finds himself, there is built up an objective drama—forming a sort of overplot—more or less closely related to the main interests. It touches them, now here, now there; only certainly in the end of the play, where the supreme psychological moment, the crisis of his life, and the decisive epoch in the course of events, all coincide. In the main, it is just a shell of circumstance under cover of which the real drama is in the progress before mentioned. This interchange of the usual relation of plot and character interest, and the readjustment necessary to it, gives the clew to the complexities of Browning's structure.

What Browning loses in dramatic clearness by this view of the deed,—by the complexity of structure and the subversion of the unities into which it leads him,—he gains in psychological interest. And Browning is first and last a student of the soul. Let us see what light his own words throw upon his purpose. In *Rabbi Ben Eera* Browning has given us his view of life in terms which will serve as a direct statement of his dramatic purpose—of what he wishes to present in his drama:

"But all, the world's coarse thumb
And finger failed to plumb,
So passed in making up the main account;

All instincts immature,
 All purposes unsure,
 That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's
 amount.

"Thoughts hardly to be packed
 Into a narrow act,
 Fancies that broke through language and escaped ;
 All I could never be,
 All men ignored in me,
 This I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped."

Since Browning aims to show the man, not as
 he appears to his fellows, but as he appears to
 God ; since he wishes to bôdy forth

All instincts immature,
 All purposes unsure,

and brushes aside "things done which took the
 eye and had the price," it is evident that he must
 present not the character of a man only, which is
 graven by *things done*, but the soul of him, wherein
 dwell those

Thoughts hardly to be packed
 Into a narrow act,
 Fancies that broke through language and escaped.

He must be, in short, a dramatist of the subjective.

Now this presentation of the inner life of the
 man, which Browning expressly says cannot be
 presented by action, is ringed about with difficul-
 ties. It is the work, at once of the dramatist and
 of the psychologist. From one point of view incon-
 sequent action is made intelligible by explanation,
 and from the other subtle analysis becomes illus-
 trated by concrete example. The author must at
 once be presenting a bit of life, and at the same
 time interpreting it to reader or audience. Some-
 times, when the deeds are conceived by Browning
 as being merely inexpressive, we have him pre-
 senting an action, and then supplementing it with
 comment, either his own or the narrator's, ex-
 plaining away an act here, giving new meaning
 there, until the whole drama or incident is propped
 into significance.

Again, when the act is considered as in itself
 misleading, he presents us first a drama of the
 objective, and then requires us to look through it
 into another absolutely different one below. Thus
 it appears to the world, he says ; thus it really is.
 This is well illustrated by his treatment of an old
 story in the dramatic fragment entitled *The Glove*.

Here he refuses to let us interpret the action in
 the old way ; but by giving the inner workings of
 the lady's mind—explaining her motives—he
 changes for us the whole dramatic value of the
 deed. Instead of an act of overweening vanity,
 for which she is justly punished, it becomes a test
 of De Lorgne's sincerity, in which he is found
 wanting. In one aspect the incident reveals the
 weakness of the lady, in the other the baseness
 of the man. The plot relations, too, are altered.
 In the old story, the chief actor is De Lorgne,
 the one acted upon is the lady. In the Browning
 rendition the positions are exactly reversed. This
 is accomplished by a page of interpretation. Peter
 Ronsard, the narrator, a clear-eyed spectator of
 the little comedy, divines shrewdly the lady's
 state of mind, and sets it before us. Thus it is
 by interpretation we are able to see through the
 enactor to the act. We comprehend its signifi-
 cance only after we understand the feeling which
 produced it, the act itself being open to misinter-
 pretation. Practically, the order followed here is
 first the incident, then the interpretation of it ;
 but so closely does the explanation travel on the
 heels of the story that one *reads back* the later
 into the earlier impression, and seems at the end
 to have had throughout a consciousness of a
 double presentation ; one played to the court,
 and the other to oneself ; one objective, the other
 subjective. The act of throwing the glove to the
 lion begins the action ; De Lorgne striking the
 glove in the lady's face is the result and completion
 of it. But in one the act, conceived in vanity,
 ends in the shame and humiliation of the lady
 before the court ; while in the other the act, con-
 ceived in proud intolerance of sham, ends in the
 shame and humiliation before us of her protago-
 nist. Thus the two dramas part company. One
 is played for her contemporaries, and ends in one
 fashion ; the other, played for us, ends in quite
 another. We see the lady, passing out, proud
 and patient, amid the contumely and derision of
 the court—we see and understand. She who, for
 ages, has been misnamed in song and story is
 comprehended at last. Browning's attitude toward
 his characters in this fragment is eminently char-
 acteristic. Throughout his plays he is an ardent
 champion, and constantly at war with contem-
 porary judgment.

Hamlet says, dying :

O good Horatio—what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown shall live behind me !
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.

It is as if this cry of Hamlet's had reached Browning as a great appeal from all wronged, thwarted, misrepresented human lives, and he had taken up the burden of interpreting them aright. This purpose of necessity moulds the form of drama to it ; but how ? In a dramatic monologue, or in any dramatic lyric where a narrative of action is given, the blending of presentment and comment can be shrewdly done as above by the narrator, and the technique is fairly simple ; but when we come to consider not a mere incident as *The Glove*, but a whole play constructed to show two dramas, one objective and the other subjective, the question instantly arises as to their plot relations. Do the rise and fall of the two coincide ? If not, what is the connection in a five act drama between the two movements ? In rebelling against the judgment of contemporaries, for instance, he must perforce throw some weight in the dramatic construction upon such judgment, let it affect in some vital way the character ; and if this is done, the subjective drama, which usually consists, as we have noted, of the presentment of a man, and then his deeds, must have come—in some place, in some plays—in close and vital connection with that shell of circumstance which in the beginning fits so lightly around the real interests. Often, as we have seen, this connection is established in the last half of the play ; almost always at the *situation* in the end there is the blending of the great psychological moment with the crisis in his career. But the matter of place-combination, is decided entirely by the exigencies of each play, and can scarcely be generalized on successfully.

This rebellion against contemporary judgment can be considered merely as a logical outcome of his view of the *deed*. How could Browning trust the general consensus of opinion when he discredits the representative value of the acts on which those opinions are based ? However we regard it, whether as partisanship or psychological accuracy,

this discrediting of appearances, and so of opinion, forms a distinct element to be reckoned on in the structure. It forces him to present that very appearance of things against which he is in rebellion. Sometimes it is done in a mere phrase : In *Pippa Passes*, he gives a quick ironic glance at the fair surface of things before he rends it. He speaks of Asolo's *four happiest ones*, and then the phrase is torn asunder, and we see four human beings in the agonies of soul birth and soul death ; always in crucial suffering. The whole of *The Ring and the Book* moves in great concentric circles from false appearances and opinions to the heart of truth. It moves first from the consideration of the views of half Rome to those of Pompilia ; from those who heard, past those who acted, to the one who suffered. Then it passes from the superficial dicta of the lawyers to the deep heart of the matter in the speech of the Pope ; then last from Guido's false presentment of himself as an injured husband, through tortuous windings of evil nature to the gradual revelation of himself, disclosing at last a moral consciousness, a perception of that truth which he has set himself against, in his one sincere utterance, that cry of mortal terror : "*Pompilia, will you let them murder me ?*" So, in the first and last chapters in which Browning speaks for himself, he moves from discussion of matters of mere external interest to an explanation of his great art purpose.

This contrast between the "fair seeming show" and the reality is too characteristic a habit of thought in Browning to be ever quite absent from his works. Sometimes it is the main *motif*, moulding the drama or dramatic incident to it ; again, it is the informing idea of an act or scene developing it to itself, and away from the main thought, and so twisting the structure ; again, it is put in a phrase, throwing a search light back or forward into the play : always and everywhere the contrast : thus it seems ; thus it really is.

Thus from another point of approach, one sees how the dramatist and the psychologist mingle oddly in the works of Browning. Not only must action be made intelligible by the revelation of motives, but the appearance of things must be given the lie by the presentation of realities. The opposite *order* of development which these present indicate the two types of structure he follows.

Their blending in a single play gives the clue to many of his complexities ; generally the first is the order of the play, while the second produces variants from it by informing an act or scene.

When we remember that the aim of Browning is to present those

Thoughts that could not be packed,
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through language and escaped :

we find that in this discussion of construction we have only touched the outer rim of the difficulty. How is the life of the human soul to be presented in a drama? Practical difficulties arise at every step. How, for instance, is the "explanation" we found necessary to be made? The Greek chorus, which could have been developed into a fit interpreter, is eliminated. Browning's characters must either interpret themselves—enquire into their own mental processes, and then speak them forth with the most full-voiced self-consciousness—or else be explained, in a similar fashion, by their fellows. In either case we have analysis, which violates at once dramatic method and essential dramatic truth : analysis violates method in that it stops the movement to explain ; and violates truth since it presents the characters as doing what in real life would be unnatural. Obviously his necessity to make the characters interpret themselves is destructive to natural dialogue. For his characters to reveal their inmost selves in the language of every day life would be to violate the decency and dignity of reticence which alone makes human intercourse possible, and by so doing they forfeit that respect which is necessary to the fullest sympathy. As dramatist, then, he must let his characters speak each to other, keeping fast hold of all the reserves and silences of daily life ; while, as interpreter, he must speak through them directly to the audience ; must vocalize for us all the dumb content of the human soul. He shows us Pippa weaving holiday fancies in her bed-chamber ; again, singing in the streets of Asolo, cleaving with sunshine and song the dark recesses of crime, lighting doubt to sure faith ; hesitation to forthrightness, and temptation to right abhorrence ; and last, musing child thoughts and praying child prayers at nightfall. But it is Browning who gives to her unconsciousness conscious speech ; it is not Pippa we hear, but Browning's vocalization

of her soul. So Pompilia, in *The Ring and The Book*, speaks no peasant language. There is nothing peasant in her save, perhaps, her *simplicity* ; and that is more the simplicity of purity and elemental womanhood than of the peasant. The thought, one can see, is in character ; but the vocabulary, the images, are Browning's own.

Sometimes in the drama the characters interpret themselves, speak the language of the underplot ; and again, as the exigencies of the objective plot demand it, they speak the language of every-day life. A strange blending of these in a single scene occurs in the third act, third scene of *Strafford*. The scene occurs in the ante-room to the House of Commons. Strafford has just been denounced by Pym as traitor, and is now being arrested for treason ; it is a crisis in his career as statesman ; it is also a moment of poignant anguish. As leader, he must front the situation manfully ; as a tortured soul upon the rack of loyalty, he must reveal to us his agony. We hear two voices ; one Strafford's the man, speaking to men ; the other, Browning's vocalization of the dumb content of his soul. One moment Strafford rises to the critical historical crisis—and speaks so :

Let us go forth : follow me, gentlemen,
Draw your swords, too : cut any down that bar us,
On the King's service ! Maxwell, clear the way.

A moment later to his own men his heart finds utterance :

Slingsby, I've loved you at least : make haste !
Stab me ! I have not time to tell you why.
You, then, my Bryan ! Mainwaring, you then !

Again we hear two voices : one speaks in pride and scorn directly to the situation.

The king is sure to have your heads, you know.

Then follows the anguished cry of his inner consciousness :

But what if I can't live this moment through.
Pym who is there with his pursuing smile.

We must carry throughout a double consciousness. The scene must shift with lightning-like rapidity from the ante-room in the House of Commons to the secret chambers of Strafford's soul. Any failure on the reader's part to do this is disastrous to the artistic effect. Now we hear a soul in deep distress, and the words carry conviction :

We like a cry of agony
Because we know it's true.

Then there rises before us a real scene—a world of actuality ; we see not a soul pressed by thronging emotions, but a man girt with hostile soldiers, and the words ring false. Maxwell and the Puritans—men who are to be the Ironsides—what do they make of these wild and whirling words? Again, the utter anguish of them takes possession of us, the world fades—we are alone with the naked soul of a man. Thus, as our consciousness of the soul or the circumstances comes uppermost, the values shift. One can easily see that such a blending of the critical historical moment and the critical psychological moment might prove mutually thwarting.

(*To be continued.*)

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EDGAR POË ET ALFRED DE MUSSET.

Il ne s'agit pas d'un rapprochement littéraire entre ces deux poètes, tout au moins d'un rapprochement complet. Ni l'objet de leurs chants ni leur manière n'appellent une comparaison. Pourtant ils ont un trait commun. Dans *William Wilson*,¹ conte aux fantastiques événements, mais image plus ou moins réelle de sa vie, Edgar Poë, après avoir décrit de façon charmante l'école anglaise où s'écoulèrent ses jeunes années, parle d'un enfant de génie, violent, passionné, c'est lui-même. Son influence s'exerce sur tous ses camarades, un seul excepté, parfaitement semblable à lui de taille, de visage, même de nom. Signe distinctif : sa voix n'est qu'un murmure, un chuchotement, mais toujours, dit Poë, "le parfait écho de la mienne."² De son côté, Alfred de Musset écrit dans la *Nuit de Décembre* :³

Du temps que j'étais écolier,
Je restais un soir à veiller
Dans notre salle solitaire.

Devant ma table vint s'asseoir
Un pauvre enfant vêtu de noir
Qui me ressemblait comme un frère.

Poë voyait donc un double de lui-même ; Musset aussi. Je voudrais analyser ici cette singulière et commune vision,—fiction ou hallucination, il n'importe, — signaler sous quelle influence elle apparut aux deux poètes, préciser enfin sa signification morale.

Ainsi William Wilson, le jumeau de Poë, résistait à son despotisme précoce. Bien plus, il intervenait dans sa conduite, tantôt par un avis discret, tantôt par un conseil impérieux, jamais découragé par les rebuffades de son ami. Naturellement ses bons offices lui devinrent odieux, sans qu'il parvint à les détourner. Il a beau quitter la pension Bransby, aller à Eton, le double l'y suit. Un jour, avec quelques camarades aussi fous que lui, dans une chambre du collège, il se livre à une débauche effrénée de boisson et de jeu. Soudain, on l'appelle au-dehors ; il se trouve en face de son inséparable compagnon, qui chuchote très-bas son nom seulement, puis disparaît. Un autre jour, tandis qu'il joue malhonnêtement aux cartes, William Wilson—le Double—fait irruption au milieu de la compagnie, et dénonce publiquement sa faute. Exaspéré, Poë fuit dans une agonie d'horreur et de honte. Il fuyait en vain. "Ma destinée maudite m'a poursuivi, triomphante, et me prouvant que son mystérieux pouvoir n'avait fait jusqu'alors que de commencer. A peine eus-je mis le pied dans Paris, que j'eus une preuve nouvelle du détestable intérêt que le Wilson prenait à mes affaires. Les années s'écoulèrent et je n'eus point de répit. Misérable ! A Rome, avec quelle importune obséquiosité, avec quelle tendresse de spectre, il s'interposa entre moi et mon ambition ! Et à Vienne ! et à Berlin ! et à Moscou ! Où donc ne trouvai-je pas quelque amère raison de le maudire du fond de mon cœur ! Frappé d'une panique, je pris enfin la fuite devant son impénétrable tyrannie, comme devant une peste, et jusqu'au bout du monde, j'ai fui, j'ai fui en vain."⁴

L'élévation de caractère, la majestueuse sagesse, l'omniprésence de Wilson inspiraient à Poë une sorte de terreur, sans contenir hélas ! sa passion

¹ *Tales of Conscience*. Edition Stedman et Woodberry, 1894.

² Pp. 11 et 14.

³ *Poésies nouvelles*, Edit. Charpentier, 1896.

⁴ *William Wilson*, p. 28. Traduction Baudelaire. Toutes nos citations sont empruntées à cette traduction.